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SUBJECT: ECUADORIAN PRISONS IN CRISIS - UNDERFUNDED AND
MISMANAGED

¶1. Summary: President Palacio on June 7 declared a state of emergency in Ecuador's prisons to address faulty infrastructure, overpopulation, violence and meager resources that had led to ongoing prisoner and worker strikes. Despite an \$8 million budget increase in April, the majority of the funds have yet to be delivered. The government is exploring public-private partnerships as a way to increase investment, but 2007 funds remain uncertain. This cable summarizes the budget and management challenges faced by the prison system; a separate cable will explore prison conditions. End Summary.

State of Emergency Declared in June

¶2. On June 7, President Palacio, pressured by worker and prisoner strikes, initiated a 70 day state of emergency for Ecuador's 35 detention centers that drew attention to a paltry budget. Ecuador's prison authority, the National Social Rehabilitation Board (DNRS), reported that a state of emergency would speed up investment, private contracts, and the rebuilding of Quito's Second Prison (destroyed by a fire in March).

¶3. In April, 1,526 prison workers initiated a national strike. Employees demanded budget increases of \$20 million per year for overtime pay of prison guards, additional pay for 262 contracted workers paid below standard rates, food for prisoners, and infrastructure improvement. On June 16, prisoners and DNRS's 1,500 employee board asked for the resignation of National Prison Director Marco Gonzalez, accusing him of negligence and mismanagement. Prisoner Bryon Briones said that Gonzalez has not made progress towards the budget crisis, overcrowding, or reinserting prisoners into society. He added that "as long as these people continue to manage this institution, things will not change. They are asking for money for themselves."

Prison Strikes and Riots Frequent

¶4. Prisoners have frequently gone on strike to protest prison conditions. According to a January 2006 study headed by Fernando Carrion of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) University (brother of Ecuador's Foreign Minister Francisco Carrion), strikes are necessary to ensure resources. In January, prisons #1 and #3 in Quito declared a strike and held visitors hostage in order to reinstate the reduction of sentences based on good behavior, formerly allowed under Article 33 of the penal code. The two day strike ended with negotiations between the National Committee of Prisoners and the presidency.

¶5. On February 9, newspapers reported a riot at an Ambato prison after a guard was arrested for possession of marijuana. Antiriot forces confronted the prisoners, who demanded to talk to journalists and voiced grievances of mistreatment. The director of the prison said the \$1.00 a day provided for food was inadequate and that the prison was 100 prisoners above capacity.

Budget Reform Needed

¶6. Despite President Palacio's announcement of a budget increase of \$8 million in April, funds are still drastically insufficient and expenses have grown at an annual rate of 58%. In the last five years, the prison budget has increased 4 times, by \$6.73 million in 2001 and \$21.15 million in 2004. This year, however, DNRS received \$98,000 less than in 2005 despite an increase in the prison population. According to Gonzalez, DNRS's current budget of \$31 million does not cover the needs of employees or prisoners. Cecelia Armas, the national attorney general, said that she will work with the Ministry of Economy to pursue an emergency budget for 2007. Gonzalez said additional funds would be used to pay guard salaries and bolster infrastructure projects including the construction of additional wings. On April 9, DNRS received the first million that would go towards paying back salaries.

¶7. Ecuador has been looking towards U.S. and Chilean models of privatization and public-private partnerships as a solution that could reduce state costs and overcrowding and improve rehabilitation programs for inmates. Private entities would design, finance, construct and maintain

facilities and provide services. The mayor of Quito signed an agreement with business associations that will invest \$1 million in the construction of a maximum security prison, reported papers on June 28. The project would also fund the development of rehabilitation centers and income generating projects within the prison.

Comment

¶8. Obstacles faced by Ecuadorian prisons, which fit into a general regional pattern, have reached a crisis point. The state's increased emphasis on privatization could temporarily boost resources; however, the government will need to secure budget allocations for next year.

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